



CULTURAL GUIDE TO MALAYSIA

Transition Center
George P. Shultz National
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CULTURAL GUIDE TO MALAYSIA

Prepared for the

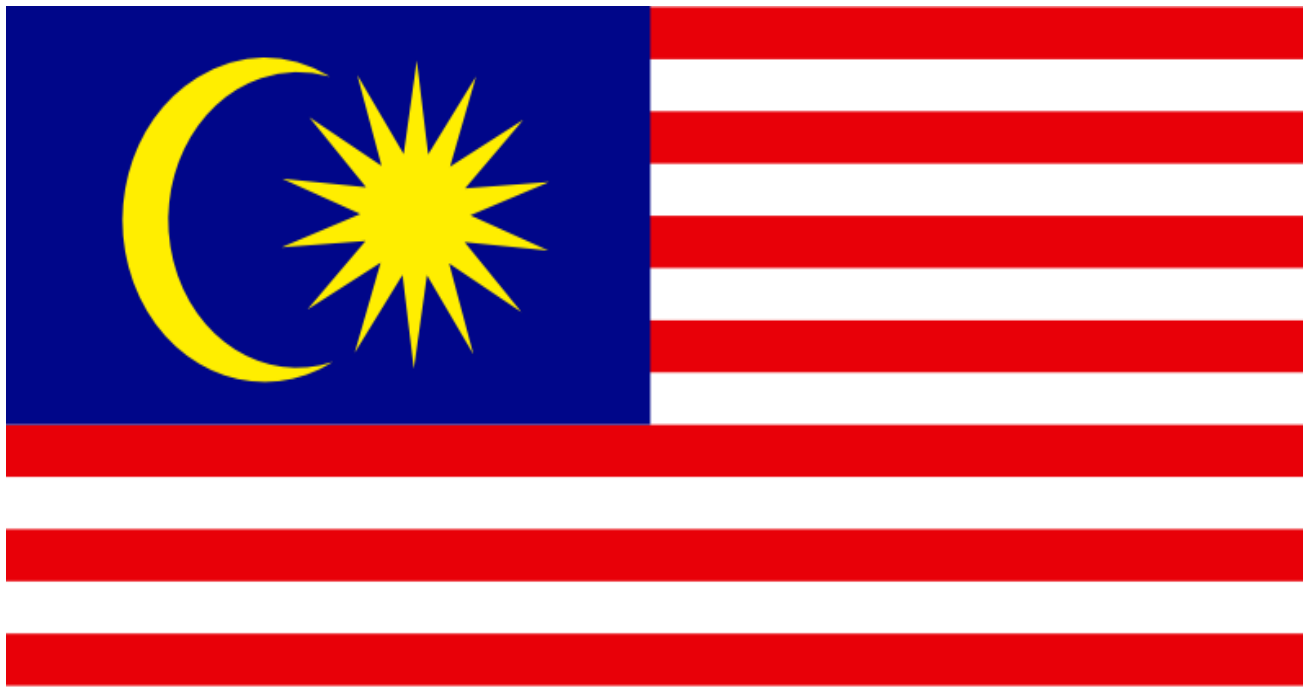
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INTRODUCTION

Among Asian countries, Malaysia is relatively unknown to Americans. When they first arrive, Americans are often pleasantly surprised by the impressive and innovative skyline of the capital, Kuala Lumpur, which makes the city seem very modern and Westernized. They soon come to see that the city also has a charming colonial ambience and Eastern flavor that reveal the influence of Islam and colonization by successive European powers, including 156 years of British rule that ended in 1957. The mixed heritage is also revealed in the people. On bustling Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Malay women in traditional *baju kurung* (a long-sleeved shift worn over a long skirt), and Indian women in saris share the sidewalks with youths in skin-tight jeans or the latest fashions from Hong Kong and Paris. A Chinese bridal couple in Western wedding garb speeds home in a gaily

decorated Mercedes and the next day change into traditional Chinese costume to perform the tea ceremony of obeisance to their respective new in-laws.

You will find Malaysia to be a country where the expatriate can live with almost no accommodation to “foreign” ways. But that would be to miss the chance to enrich oneself by going out among Malaysians and participating in the staggering diversity of their lives. If you wish to make the effort, you will find it easy. It is hard to imagine a country at once so exotic to the Westerner yet so non-threatening at the same time. For the American newcomer to adapt to this cultural potpourri, it is advisable to learn a few cultural do’s and don’ts of each major race as well as of the people as a whole.



BACKGROUND

GEOGRAPHY

Malaysia comprises Peninsular Malaysia, which lies south of Thailand and north of Singapore, and East Malaysia, which occupies the northern quarter of Borneo. The two regions, separated by about 400 miles of the South China Sea, total 129,000 square miles in area. Thirteen states make up Malaysia: Eleven of these—Perlis, Kedah, Pinang, Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor, Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan—are in Peninsular Malaysia; the remaining two, Sabah and Sarawak, constitute East Malaysia.

Part of a geologically stable and mature area, Malaysia's landscape is characterized by coastal plains and rugged interior mountains and highlands. The coastal plains are either alluvial or swampy where the coast is sheltered and sandy where it is exposed. The interior mountains are the headlands for most of the country's rivers, which tend to be mature and sluggish. Mount Kinabalu,

located in East Malaysia and 13,455 feet high, is the highest point in Southeast Asia.

Located between 1° and 7° north of the equator, Malaysia experiences a tropical climate with warm temperatures between 70° F and 90° F, except at higher altitudes where it is cooler. Warm clothing is only needed in the hill stations, which are weekend resorts in the mountains. Rainy seasons related to the monsoon cycles are the only climatic variation. The northeast monsoon blows from the South China Sea between November and January while the southwest monsoon blows from the Indian Ocean between June and October. While there is no true dry season, there are two drier transitional periods from April to May and October to November. Annual rainfall totals about 100 inches in the lowlands.

The abundant rainfall and warm temperatures have fostered the growth of equatorial rainforests in Malaysia. Seventy percent of the country is still covered by forests, much of it virgin. Even in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, lush groves of vegetation may be found. However, since the 19th century, much of the west coast has been deforested for commercial and agricultural purposes and for the construction of roads and railways.

In addition to Kuala Lumpur, the major cities are Georgetown, Ipoh, Melaka, and Johor Baru, all on the western side of the Peninsula.

HISTORY

Broadly speaking, Malaysia's history can be divided into two periods—the pre-Melakan period before AD 1400 and the Melakan era followed by the evolution of the Malay Peninsula into Malaysia after AD 1400.

The oldest human relics on the Malay Peninsula are 10,000 years old; those in Sarawak date back 35,000 years. It is now believed that the early migrants, who probably originated from the Asian mainland near or around southern China, came not so much in waves but filtered into the region over an extended period of many years. This migration was combined with the movement of peoples among the islands and along coasts and rivers.

Trade helped shape the region. For hundreds of years prior to the founding of Melaka around AD 1400, trade networks had been operating between the Near East and the Far East. Because the monsoon winds that blew over the Malay Peninsula only allowed travel in one direction for part of the year, Indian, Arab, and Chinese traders used the Peninsula as a stopover. The Peninsula itself was rich in natural resources that were much in demand.

What little is really known about the region prior to AD 1400 is shrouded in myth. Around the 7th century,

Srivijaya, a Malay kingdom somewhere in Sumatra, rose to power and exercised control over regional trade. By the 13th century Srivijaya was in decline, and at the close of the 14th century the ruler of Palembang, part of the Srivijayan kingdom, rebelled against his Javanese overlords and was expelled. According to one popular account, the ruler and other refugees fled to what is now Singapore and later went on to found Melaka on the southwestern coast of the Malay Peninsula.



In 1786 the British East India Company established a settlement on the island of Penang, hitherto a part of Kedah.

Based on Srivijayan administration, a fine natural harbor, and alliances with local seafarers, among other factors, Melaka grew rapidly into a trading center. Melaka's traditions can be traced to modern Malay political relationships and the functioning of Malay society itself. Since it was believed that the Palembang rulers were descended from a lineage that went as far back as Alexander the Great, the ruler and his court carried status and prestige. A type of social covenant was created that forbade the ruler ever to shame any of his subjects in return for absolute loyalty from his subject.

Melaka's cultural influence (and to a lesser extent its boundaries and overlordship)

spread throughout the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, spurred on by its embrace of Islam in the early 15th century. Islam, besides attracting large numbers of Muslim-Indian traders, also brought membership in the great Islamic community, which included Turkey and Mogul India. Melaka's prestige and commercial success in turn reinforced the spread of Islam in the region. Melaka's style of government and culture was a model for other Muslim kingdoms in the archipelago. The



Malaysian stamp from the days of "British Malaya"

language Melakan Malay became so widely used that it became closely identified with Malay culture and *adat* (customs). Today, there is still some confusion as to what makes a Melayu (Malay), a definition necessary to determine who are *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) and therefore entitled to the special privileges under the New

Economic Policy of Malaysia.

The next phase of Melaka's history saw the coming of the Europeans and subsequent European influence and control. In an effort to divert the Asian spice trade away from the Muslims, Portugal set out to establish a new sea trade route around the Cape of Good Hope. Vasco da Gama laid siege to Melaka and captured it in 1511. Members of the Melakan Sultanate dispersed in order to found kingdoms in other parts of the Peninsula. In 1641 the Dutch captured Melaka after years of commercial rivalry and hostility with the Portuguese in Southeast Asia.

In 1786 the British East India Company, needing a port along the China trade route, established a settlement on the island of Penang, hitherto a part of Kedah, thus obtaining a foothold in the Peninsula. Penang was made a free port and prospered, to the annoyance of the Dutch, who charged duties. When the French captured the Netherlands, to prevent Dutch possessions from falling into French hands, Britain and the Dutch government-in-exile agreed that Britain would take over the Dutch colonial possessions until the war was over. When the European wars were over, the Dutch reoccupied Melaka for only 6 years before ceding it to Britain in 1824 in return for Britain's possessions in Indonesia.

Meanwhile, fearful of the revival of Dutch strength in the region, a British East India Company official obtained permission to establish a trading post on the island of Singapore. In 1824 he succeeded in getting

the Sultan of Johor to cede Singapore to the British. With its strategic geographical position and free port status, Singapore thrived.

In 1826 Singapore, Melaka, and Penang were joined to form the Straits Settlements. Initial British policy was one of non-intervention in the Malay states outside the Straits Settlements. However, this policy was not strictly adhered to. Tin, which was mined abundantly in Perak and Selangor, was in great demand by the canning industry. Many Chinese from south China migrated to the Malay Peninsula to take advantage of the economic opportunities there. Disputes among the Malay chiefs and among the Chinese miners interfered with production so much that the Straits Settlements merchants pressed for British intervention to restore production. In 1874 the first in a series of treaties between Great Britain and the rulers of the Malay states was signed and paved the way to the establishment of the Resident system of indirect rule by the British. The British Residents supposedly only advised the rulers on how to administer their states, but some Residents interfered with local customs and practices in attempts to implement their commercial policies.

In 1896 the Federated Malay States were created, consisting of Selangor, Perak, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang. In 1909 the northern states in the Peninsula—Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Trengganu, which had been under Siamese overlordship—were handed over to Britain as British protectorates (known as the Unfederated Malay States) with British advisors. By 1914, with Johor accepting a British advisor, British control over the Malay Peninsula was complete. The Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States, and the Unfederated Malay States formed "British Malaya."

Under the British, commercial development of rubber expanded and prospered with the invention of the motorcar. Indian labor was brought in to work the rubber estates. With the British and the Chinese dominating trade, the easygoing Malays who traditionally worked as farmers and fisherman became stuck in these traditional occupations, with the exception of the elite, who held minor jobs in the administration.

Occupation and commercial prosperity unfortunately came to be associated with race. The profits from tin and rubber were used to build the infrastructure of the country. Although the presence of the Chinese and the Indians in Malaya was originally regarded as temporary, a plural society developed.

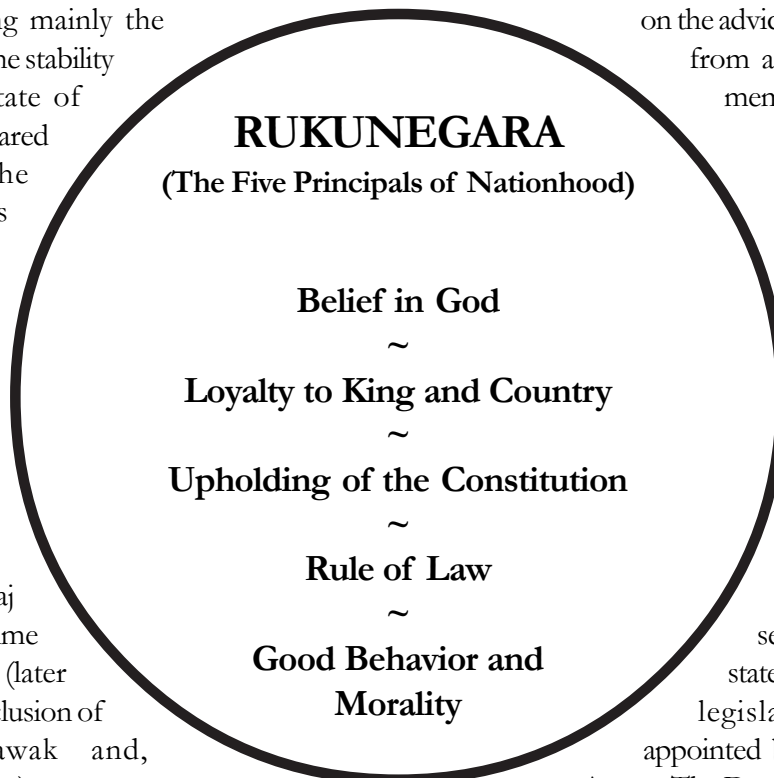
The Japanese occupation of Malaya in 1941 put off increasing pressure from the emerging Malays for independence. When Malaysia was back in British hands, the Federation of Malaya was established in 1948 as a step in this direction. Communist insurgency involving mainly the Chinese threatened the stability of Malaya and a state of emergency was declared in 1948. With the Emergency in its twilight years and a formula worked out guaranteeing citizenship to all races, independence was effectively granted on August 30, 1957, and Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj became the first Prime Minister of Malaya (later Malaysia, with the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak and, temporarily, Singapore).

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE

Malaysia is a federal parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy. The Federal Constitution provides for a Head of State and two elected Houses of Parliament. The Head of State is the Duli Yang Maha Mulia Seri Paduka Baginda Yang DiPertuan Agong, (meaning "One who is chief among the prominent"), or paramount ruler of Malaysia elected

for a five-year term by the Conference of Rulers from among themselves. The Conference of Rulers comprises the hereditary rulers, or sultans.

The Prime Minister is the Head of Government and the true wielder of political power in the country. He presides over a Cabinet of Ministers that makes policies in the country and exercises executive authority. The leader of the political party or coalition that wins the most seats in Parliament, he has to be officially appointed by the Yang DiPertuan Agong. Cabinet Ministers are appointed by the Yang DiPertuan Agong, on the advice of the Prime Minister, from among the ruling party members.



The bicameral Parliament consists of the Dewan Negara (Senate) and the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives). The Dewan Negara has 59 members, or Senators, who serve for a term of six years. Twenty-six senators (two from each state) are selected by the state legislatures and 32 are appointed by the Yang DiPertuan Agong. The Dewan Rakyat has 180 seats.

Its members, called Members of Parliament (MPs), are elected by universal suffrage once every five years. The Parliament debates and votes on legislation submitted by the executive. Universal suffrage for all citizens aged 21 or over is provided for by the Constitution, which also provides for state and local government.

The Malaysian legal system, originally based on the English common law system, is being modified to reflect the local context. The Malaysian Supreme Court has exclusive jurisdiction in constitutional matters and disputes between states or between a state and the Federal Government. It also hears appeals from the



Malaysia's indigenous population includes the *orang asli* (Senoi, Negritos, and Jakuns) of the Peninsula and numerous other tribal groups that form the majority of the population in East Malaysia.

High Courts. Islamic law (*Syariah*) governs Muslim society and is the domain of the states. Judges of the Supreme and High Courts are appointed by the Yang DiPertuan Agong on the advice of the Prime Minister and can be removed from office only under very stringent procedures.

The ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional, is led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and includes the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), Gerakan (predominantly urban Chinese, strong in Penang), and a number of smaller parties based in the East Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah. The major opposition parties are the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a socialist party supported primarily by ethnic Chinese,

and the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), which canvasses for the Malay vote on an Islamic platform.

THE PEOPLE

Malaysia is a melting pot of many races, ethnic groups, languages, and cultures. So well represented are the different peoples, languages, and cultures of Asia that it has been called Asia in miniature. The population totals about 23.5 million (July 2004 est.) of which 58% consist of Malays and other indigenous peoples (*bumiputera*), 24% Chinese, 8% Indians and 10% Eurasians, Thais, Arabs, and others. The Malays and indigenous groups of Malaysia are probably descended from peoples who slowly filtered into the Malay archipelago over many, many years in prehistoric

times. Later on, the growth of trade in the region brought many of its first Indians, Arabs, and Chinese. The Portuguese left the Portuguese-Eurasian legacy, still centered in Melaka. The development of tin mines and rubber plantations saw the influx of numerous Chinese and Indian laborers who eventually married and settled in the new homeland. Most Chinese and Indians are relative newcomers whose grandparents, like many Americans, were born overseas.

The indigenous people include the *orang asli* (Senoi, Negritos, and Jakuns) of Peninsular Malaysia, and numerous other tribal groups such as the Bajaus, Kadazans, and Muruts of Sabah and the Kedayans, Melanaus, and Ibans of Sarawak. These latter groups form the majority of the population in East Malaysia. There are also many Indonesians and Filipinos, who are in the country illegally.

Among the three major races, there are significant differences based on ancestral origin and language and/or dialect. Justice cannot be done to all the different ethnic groups in the country. Malaysian census masks the true variation in language and lifestyle. Past census efforts have, for example, enumerated 38 different groups in the state of Sabah alone, whereas only three main groups are listed now. At the same time, by virtue of living in the same physical environment, a common worldview has evolved even among the most different of groups. Superstitions, animism, and worship of ancestors among the most isolated tribes are shared to a degree even by some of the modern, city-bred Malaysians, Chinese, and Indians.

RELIGION

Malaysian racial and ethnic plurality is reinforced by the religious and cultural distinctiveness of each group. Almost all Malays and large numbers of the indigenous people belonging to the Bajau, Kedayan, and Melanau groups are Muslims. Although there are a few Malays who are Christians, it is very unusual because in Malaysia being Malay has come to be synonymous with being Muslim. Not long ago when a few Malaysian

Muslims were converted to Christianity, a wave of outrage went through the Muslim community and the government promptly clamped down on proselytization. Most Chinese are either Christians or adhere to Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucian beliefs or a mixture thereof. There are Chinese converts to Islam as well. Indians are mainly Hindu with many Muslims and Christians. The remaining indigenous people are either Christians or animists and ancestor-worshippers.

LANGUAGE

Almost all Malaysians are at least bilingual. Although Bahasa Malaysia (literally “Language of Malaysia”) is the national language and medium of instruction, English is widely used, especially among the elite. The newcomer to Malaysia will find that more members of the older generation speak English more fluently than the younger generation. This is because the use of English as the medium of instruction was phased out beginning in 1970. In recent years, the marked deterioration in English language ability among Malaysians and the recognition that English is still the international language of commerce has aroused doubts about the prudence of de-emphasizing the English language. Yet, fluency in one language, Bahasa Malaysia, among all Malaysians is seen as the key to national unity and identity, an all-consuming goal.

In English, the term Malay is often heard for Bahasa Malaysia. Malay dialects differ in certain words, rhythm, and pronunciation, but the present pronunciation favored by the government is that of the Johor-Riau area in the south. Its widespread acceptance as the standard written and spoken language, however, will probably take years. Rumi or romanized script is used to write Bahasa Malaysia.

Malaysian English is much closer to British English than American English. Some Malaysians speak with a clipped British accent, and many words common in British English such as boot instead of trunk, bonnet instead of hood, lift instead of elevator, and flat instead of apartment are used. Certain hackneyed phrases and

Bahasa Malaysia

The national language of Malaysia is Bahasa Malaysia or Malay. It is spoken by 10,000,000 in Malaysia including second language speakers; 12,000 in Hong Kong; 6,253 in USA; 10,000,000 in Indonesia; 396,000 in Singapore; 21,000 in Myanmar; 4,200 in United Arab Emirates; 17,600,000 or more in all countries first language speakers. Over 80% cognate with Indonesian. "Bazaar Malay" is used to refer to many regional non-standard dialects. It is written in Roman and Arabic (Jawi) scripts.

Here are a few common Bahasa Malaysian phrases:

Apa khabar? = How are you?
(Literally "What news?")
Selamat pagi = Good morning
Selamat tengahari = Good afternoon
Selamat petang = Good evening (before dark)
Selamat malam = Good evening (after dark)
or good night
Selamat datang = Welcome
Selamat jalan = Have a safe journey
Selamat tinggal = Goodbye
Selamat ulang tahun = Happy birthday
Selamat hari Raya
Aidil Fitri = Happy hari Raya
Jumpa lagi = See you again
Tahniah = Congratulations!
Syabas = Congratulations!
(Literally "excellent")

terms, and imperfections in grammar have become elements in Malaysianized English.

The Chinese also speak their own dialects including Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Hailam, and Teochew. For those Chinese who attend Chinese primary (elementary) and secondary schools (private, non-government in the latter case), Mandarin is the medium of instruction while Bahasa Malaysia and the English language are mandatory subjects. There are also Tamil language primary schools for the Indians where Tamil is the

medium of instruction. Most Indians speak Tamil or one of the other dialects of the Indian subcontinent, such as Malayalam, Telegu, Punjabi, Urdu, and Gujarati.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS



The great majority of Malaysians you will meet, especially in the cities, are either very Westernized or very accustomed to adapting their behavior to Westerners. The only exception concerns dietary practice.

APPROPRIATE GREETING FORMS

Among the educated, Westernized Malaysians, shaking hands accompanied by a "How do you do?" or "Nice to meet you" is the accepted form of greeting when being introduced. If unsure whether or not to shake hands with a Malaysian woman, a man can take his cue from her—she may or may not offer her hand.

Being polite is a way of life, especially for the Malays. The usual daily pleasantries made in the United States should be made unless, of course, when saluting non-English speakers in a Malay environment. See the box above for some sample greetings.

Each racial group has its own forms of greetings performed among themselves that you need not worry about emulating but might find interesting and useful. Malaysians warm brightly to foreigners who show any interest in their culture or attempt to speak Bahasa Malaysia.

The Malaysians, a traditionally gentle and warm people, are bound by rules of *adat* (custom) and *budi* (ideal behavior): to show unquestioned loyalty and obedience to parents and elders, to always be courteous and soft-

spoken, to treat others with respect, to help others and to maintain the peace within the home and the community. Modernization and urbanization may have wrought changes in the lifestyles of many of the younger generation, but the basic values are adhered to as well as reinforced by the tenets of Islam, which stress respect for one's elders, filial piety, and charity to others. When entering another Malaysian's home, a Malaysian calls out, "Assalaam mulaikum" (May God bless you), and the inhabitant replies, "Mulaikum assalaam" (may God bless you, too). This is a traditional Malay practice but has come to be practiced by only those who are Muslims. Malaysians greet each other, or in some cases, everyone, by salaaming, touching the other person's outstretched hand with one's hands and bringing one's hands to one's breast, which means "I greet you from my heart." A younger person uses both hands to greet elders but may use only one hand to greet someone from the younger generation. You should not salaam in return, as miming Islamic practice may not be appreciated.

Such is the regard for food that the traditional Chinese in Malaysia, like the Chinese elsewhere, invariably ask each other on meeting the English equivalent of "Have you eaten, yet?" and the answer is "Yes, I have." Others, more Westernized, may ask "How are you?" The stereotypical image of the inscrutable Chinese does spring in part from fact. "Face" is very important to Chinese people and one way to protect one's "face" or to "save face" is to keep one's feelings and insecurities to oneself. The Chinese are usually not very effusive or expressive and consequently are misunderstood as cold, calculating, and inscrutable. They are also not "touching" types. Few Chinese, unless they are very Westernized, hug or kiss even their closest friends or relatives.

Modern Indians shake hands, but the more traditional ones and most women greet each other with palms placed together and raised to the front of the face, head slightly bowed. Social distance of about an arm's length especially between the different sexes is kept. Physical touching, kissing, or hugging between men and women in public is taboo.

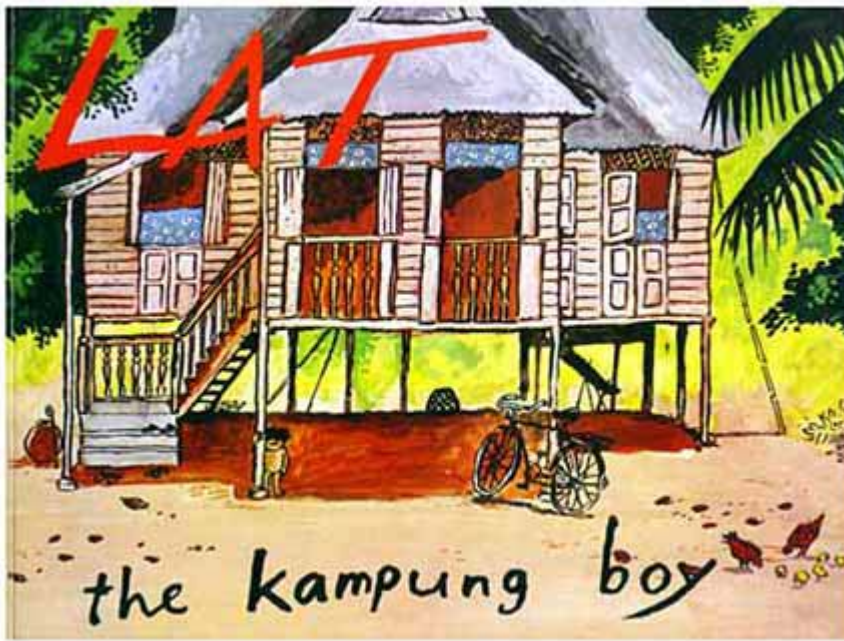


A traditional Indian greeting has palms placed together and raised to the front of the face, head slightly bowed.

NAMES, TITLES, AND HONORIFICS

Names and forms of address can be very confusing in Malaysia. Not only do Malaysian names sound different, they also have different word orders, and each race has different types of names.

The Malaysians trace their descent through their fathers. They are called by their first names, and instead of surnames, they place their father's first name behind their own. A Malaysian man's name is joined to his father's name by bin and a Malaysian woman's by binte. For example, the son and daughter of Roslan bin Mohammad might be Ismail bin Roslan and Aminah binte Roslan. The bin and the binte are often dropped.



Malaysia's most popular cartoonist Lat derives his name from his childhood nickname Bulat (meaning "round"). Lat is especially known for his comic "Kampung Boy."

Furthermore, there are some common two-word names. Abdul Rahim Taib would be known as Rahim, since Abdul is such a common name. Abu Bakar Yusof would be called Abu Bakar, since this two-word name is generally not shortened.

When addressing a Malaysian man, Encik (sounds like "in chick") or Tuan may be used as the equivalent of "mister" as in Encik Roslan or Tuan Roslan. Married women are addressed as Puan. Traditionally, Malaysian women keep their maiden names, but increasingly, they will attach their husband's name to their first names as in Puan Aminah Rahim if she is married to Rahim Razali. If unsure of a woman's marital status, it is safe to address her as Cik (pronounced "chick"). Among themselves, Malaysians may shorten their names, for example, from Ismail to "Mail." Within a family, siblings usually call each other *abang* (older brother), *kakak* (older sister), or *adik* (younger brother or sister). Affectionate nicknames are also common. Malaysia's most popular cartoonist Lat derives his name from his childhood nickname Bulat (meaning "round").

Chinese names usually consist of three characters, the surname or family name coming first followed by the

two-character personal name. It is usual for parents to give their children of the same sex the same middle character. A family with two sons may name them Lee Beng Swee and Lee Beng Yew while the daughters are Lee Mooi Lan and Lee Mooi Fah. The Chinese can be addressed as Mr., Mrs., and Miss. Married Chinese women did not formerly give up their maiden names but the practice now is to take the husband's name. Hence Miss Cheah Yoke Yee may become Mrs. Goh when she marries Mr. Goh Chai Tek, but it is also not unusual to hear her referred to as Madam Cheah. Many Chinese are given or adopt—whether or not it appears on their birth certificate—an English first name as well, which is placed before the full Chinese name, as in Mary Lee

Moot Lan. When visiting friends, children and young people customarily call their friend's parents "uncle" and "auntie" as a sign of respect.

Indians can be addressed with Mr., Mrs., and Miss. Indian women take their husband's family name upon marriage. Christian Indians follow Western name order while Hindus place the initial of their father's first name before theirs as in S. Manickavasagam. Indians have long tongue-twisting names and often prefer to shorten them, for example, from Manickavasagam to Manicka. Among the Sikhs, the letters s/o or o/o between their names and their fathers' first names mean "son of" and "daughter of." All Sikh men have the word Singh (e.g., Sukaev Singh), and single Sikh women have the word Kaur (e.g., Balbir Kaur) at their end of their names.

Malaysians hold their titles and honorifics in high regard, and protocol calls for their correct usage. Different titles are ranked in order of importance, but it is important to remember that a person's social position or public function may give him a higher rank than his title. The following are some of the more common titles used for the nobility:

Tuanku—Used to address Malay Sultans.

Tunku or Tengku—Used to address the children and grandchildren of the Sultans. Loosely equivalent to “prince” or “princess.”

Raia—Means the same thing as Tunku/Tengku in the state of Perak. It is the title for the ruler himself in the state of Perlis. With these exceptions, it is generally a title given to someone of royal blood but not of the current ruling house.

Raja Muda—The title for the heir to the throne in several Ungku or Engku. Royalty of a lesser degree than Tunku or Megat. Title given to a child of royal mother and a commoner father.

Puteri—The feminine form of Megat used in the state of Perak.

The above are only some of the many titles of Malay nobility and in some cases differ from the proper form of address that should be used in conjunction with these titles. For further information, the reader should refer to the book *Malaysian Protocol and Correct Forms of Address*.

You are more likely to run into the non-hereditary titles of honor or orders of chivalry bestowed upon non-royal persons of all races (including foreigners) in recognition of meritorious service to King or country. The more common ones are:

Tun—This is the highest honor bestowed by the Yang DiPertuan Agung and is limited to 50 living Malaysian men and women. The wife of a Tun receives the title Toh Puan. There is no male counterpart. The honor is also identified by the initials “S.M.N.” at the end of a person’s name.

Tan Sri—Second highest order of chivalry bestowed by the Yang Di Pertuan Agung and limited to 195 living Malaysian men and women. The wife of a Tan Sri is Puan Sri. The order is also identified by the initials “P.M.N.” or “P.S.M.” at the end of a person’s name.

Datuk or Dato—Highest title conferred by the rulers of the various states. The wife of a Datuk is called a Datin. There is no male counterpart. A woman who is accorded the title may choose to be called Datin instead of Datuk.

It is always correct to address a Tan Sri as Tan Sri and a Datuk as Datuk. A common Malay religious title is used in conjunction with Tuan, as in Tuan Haji Abdullah, it means that the holder of the title has made the haj (pilgrimage) to Mecca and performed certain required acts during his pilgrimage there as required by one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Women receive the title Hajjah for fulfilling this requirement.

LANGUAGE, GESTURES, AND FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

When referring to a citizen of Malaysia, the term Malaysian and not Malay is used. It would be incorrect to say “the Malay government” or “Malay dollars.” The people of Malaysia consider themselves Malaysians first and a member of a particular race second. Hence, you could refer to someone as a Malaysian-Chinese or a Malaysian-Indian. In Bahasa Malaysia, the suffix “lah” is placed at the end of a command or request to soften its impact, as in “Habiskanlah kerja ini, (Finish this work!) Lah has come to be used with no apparent meaning in daily English speech and is very Malaysian. You can catch people saying “Come on lah, let’s get going” and so on.

Behavior that is acceptable, even admired, in American society might be considered insulting to all Malaysians alike. Americans are outspoken, individualistic, and aggressive. Malaysians, on the other hand, value soft-spokenness, modesty, and self-restraint. To a Malaysian who has not had much exposure to Westerners, a typical high-spirited American can seem terribly brash and uncouth. Even though Malaysians love children, misbehavior, especially rudeness to one’s elders, is not tolerated beyond a certain age. Even the Malaysians, who are known for their gentleness with children, strive to bring up well-behaved children by example. Self-

restraint and discipline are stressed in schools. Individualism and high-spirited pranks are repressed. Never to question authority would almost be un-American, but in Malaysia it is one of the requirements of a good citizen.

When summoning people or flagging down taxis, beckon with the palm face down, using a scooping gesture, pulling toward yourself. Malaysians consider pointing with the index finger very rude. Indicate something with the thumb, hands closed in a fist. Also, use your right hand to do so and to give or receive something because the left hand, which is used by Malaysians and Indians to clean themselves after using the toilet, is considered unclean. Should you have to use both hands, try to place the right in the dominant position and if you have to use your left hand, apologize for doing so, especially to a Malaysian.

Different stances can be misleading. Standing with your hands on your hips can be misconstrued as a show of aggression. The Western method of punctuating a point by slamming a fist into an open palm is an obscene gesture here. Reclining in your chair with your feet on a chair or desk is the height of rudeness, especially if the soles of your feet face a Malaysian or an Indian. Sitting with one leg crossed over the other could leave a big toe pointing at someone, which is considered very impolite among the Malaysians and Indians.

Malaysians and Indians consider the Western way of showing appreciation for a child by patting its head or playfully mussing up its hair disrespectful; for them the head, the seat of intellect and spiritualism, is a sacred part of the body. Old-fashioned and superstitious Chinese disapprove of gushing over beautiful babies because they fear that such behavior will attract the

jealous attention of the gods, who will take the baby in question away. Some go so far as to give their babies unattractive names, and others will deny your compliments by stressing the naughtiness or ugliness of their child.

The concept of “saving face,” while more prevalent among the Chinese, is also important when dealing with other Malaysians. Many Asians tend not to express their opinions if they are negative. Unrestrained expressions of anger are not becoming in people of authority and excruciatingly embarrassing to the recipient of them.

There is a popular Malaysian proverb about how

something once said can never be retracted. Throwing a fit, making loud accusations, or scolding someone in public could lose you the respect of your subordinates, colleagues, or household help. Recipients of severe reprimands respond with expressions of embarrassment such as giggling, smiling nervously, or averting the eyes, which to the Westerner, unused to such behavior, might add insult to injury if the Westerner was wronged. Asians would rather let resentments fester than express their unhappiness.

To a Malaysian who has not had much exposure to Westerners, a typical high-spirited American can seem terribly brash and uncouth.

The Malaysian phenomenon of people running amok (which spawned the British expression of “running amuck”) is believed to stem from supposedly normal people brooding on some personal injury to the point where they rush out uncontrollably, attacking anyone in their way. When angry, try to express yourself gently and respectfully and in private to the Malaysian involved, if possible.

Malaysians are taught that modesty is a virtue. So the giving and receiving of compliments are couched in careful terms and behavior. When an American compliments a Malaysian on his/her ability or appearance, the Malaysian may behave in what appears

to the American as a coy or ungrateful manner. The Malaysian does not find it easy to thank the giver of the compliment but instead will say something like, "Oh, this is just an old rag."

GIFTS AND BONUSES

In Malaysian society, gifts are given to the host/ess when visiting or dining at the host/ess's home, during festivals, and for life-cycle celebrations such as births, weddings, and deaths. The Western custom of celebrating birthdays and giving presents to the person whose birthday it is has also become popular among the young and Westernized. One behavior common among Malaysians when they receive gifts is to put the presents aside to be opened later in private. They consider it rude to open presents in front of the giver as it makes them appear overly eager to get a present.

When invited to a Malay home to visit or dine, bringing a gift would be a nice gesture. Cakes, a box of cookies or candy, fruit, flowers, or even an ornament or a piece of batik are all appropriate, but do not bring alcohol or any sweetmeats made from pork or parts of pigs, including lard. The major Muslim festival is Hari Raya, celebrated in the month after the Muslim month of fasting or Bulan Puasa, or Bulan Ramadan. During the early part of Hari Raya, all Muslims hold open house for their friends and relatives.

The ceremonies that you are most likely to be invited to are birth, circumcision, wedding, and funeral ceremonies. Gifts for newborns do not differ from those given to Americans. Toys, blankets, and baby clothes

are appropriate. American-made toys or American brands would be greatly appreciated, as they seem to carry prestige. Gifts of sugar and tins of milk are commonly given at circumcision ceremonies. The usual Western wedding gifts, with the exception of knives (which symbolize cutting of relationship), canine ornaments (dogs are considered dirty), and ashtrays or wine glasses (Muslims are prohibited from smoking and drinking liquor) are appropriate. At funerals, Malaysians give a small amount of money in a white envelope to the family of the deceased.

Many Chinese customs and celebrations are fraught with practices based on superstition. The more traditional

Chinese always bring a gift of imported fruit, cookies, or candy to their host/ess when visiting. It is customary to give in even numbers, such as six oranges rather than five, because the Chinese believe that even numbers are lucky. When invited to dine at Chinese people's homes, it is not appropriate to bring flowers unless your hosts are very Westernized. The giving of flowers is usually associated with sickness or

death. Other gifts to avoid include knives and scissors (symbols of cutting of friendship), handkerchiefs (symbols of mourning), and clocks (in Chinese, these sound like "to go to a funeral"). The Chinese also like items to be colorful because bright reds, yellows, and golds mean happiness and prosperity whereas blues, whites, and blacks symbolize mourning and grief. Wrapping paper should also be brightly colored. One aspect of Chinese behavior to understand when presenting them with gifts on a routine visit is that they customarily show reluctance to take your gift, often accompanying efforts to push it away with disclaimers like, "No need lah. Why do you waste your money?" and so forth. In their hearts they are pleased, but they



Muslim Malaysians exchange gifts in celebration of the major Muslim festival known as Hari Raya.



In Chinese tradition, an *ang pow* is given on various occasions for good luck. The red envelope includes money in even numbers and new bills.

must not show themselves too greedy to receive your gift.

During the Chinese New Year, gifts of small amounts of money in even numbers and new bills in a red envelope, called an *ang pow*, are given to children, while larger amounts are given by married couples to unmarried people. Chinese domestic employees usually receive their bonus in the form of an *ang pow* at this time as well. The Chinese usually hold a special feast when a baby is 30 days old to celebrate the end of the confinement period during which the new mother and baby could not leave the confines of their home. The most popular gifts for a baby are gold chains, pendants, anklets, bangles, or even an *ang pow*. Brightly colored and gift-wrapped baby gifts such as toys and clothes are also appropriate. Wedding gifts should be sent ahead or brought to the wedding ceremony or wedding dinner that follows the ceremony. It is considered bad luck to deliver a gift in the days after. The usual Western wedding gifts with the exception of those mentioned earlier are appropriate but the most common and most appreciated gift is an *ang pow*. The cash gift should at least cover the guest's dinner cost as it is the means by which the bridal couple's families cover the expense of such a huge banquet. Similarly, people who pay their last respects at a funeral give the family of the deceased

cash contained in a white envelope. Flowers in the form of funeral wreaths are appropriate at this time.

For the Indians, gifts such as fruit, cake, cookies, or sweets are appropriate. In general, avoid giving alcohol. Sikhs and Indians who are Muslims are prohibited from imbibing or smoking. For a new baby, gifts of gold jewelry, brightly colored toys, and baby clothes are appreciated. Friends should not visit a new mother on Tuesdays. At puberty, Indian girls are given a puberty celebration to which guests are invited. Appropriate gifts would include gold jewelry, money, or saris. Wedding gifts can be brought to the ceremony or to the bride's house before the wedding day. Imported ornamental or functional household items as well as cash gifts in uneven amounts are appropriate.

When attending funerals, flowers and funeral wreaths may be sent. Visits to the deceased's home should only be made on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays.

The employer customarily gives an employee bonuses before the employee goes on vacation or just before the employee's most important festival. One month's salary if the employee has worked for you for one year or longer, or a pro-rated amount of one month's salary if s/he has worked for a shorter period, is the norm.

ENTERTAINING AND VISITING

Malaysians are very hospitable people who often seem more at ease entertaining than being entertained. Some Malaysians entertain at home but many, especially the Chinese, will take you out to dinner at a nice restaurant. To be invited to a Malaysian's home for a meal is therefore very complimentary because it indicates that they feel comfortable with you. It would be encouraging to Malaysians to do likewise by inviting them to your home for dinner. If unsure about how to prepare the meals, very competent professional caterers can be hired at reasonable cost. Depending on the formality of the occasion, invitations may be printed and sent or extended in person or via the telephone. It

is always courteous to R.S.V.P. an invitation unless otherwise stated on the invitation. It is necessary to specify the invitees or the spouse will not be brought along otherwise. Dress depends on the formality of the occasion and is often indicated on written invitations. Women should wear modest clothing that is not revealing.

In general, when visiting Malaysian friends, it is appropriate to take off your shoes at the door. If told not to do so, check to see what the others are doing. Statements about “Malaysian time” notwithstanding, the correct thing to do is to arrive on time for business or pleasure. Most Malaysians still ask permission to use the bathroom when they are in friends’ homes.

Etiquette dictates that food or drink set before a guest should not be touched until the host/ess invites the guest to do so. Then, at least a sip or a taste should be taken unless the food or drink is injurious to one’s health or prohibited by one’s religion, in which case an explanation is adequate. When entertaining Malaysians it is important to remember that Malaysian etiquette holds them back from accepting an invitation to take second helpings until they have been invited two or three times to do so. For Muslim guests, avoid serving pork or any dish containing lard. If you absolutely have to serve pork, inform the Muslim guests about which dishes to avoid. For Muslims, pork is *haram* (forbidden), as the pig is considered dirty. Other meats should also be *halal*, that is, slaughtered by Muslims according to Muslim rites. Halal meats are so designated with signs saying “Ditanggung halal” at supermarkets. Very strict Muslims might even require their food to be cooked or served

in crockery that has never seen pork before. Non-alcoholic beverages should be made available.

It would be considerate to set the dinner invitation for 8:30 p.m. or later. Muslims observe early evening prayers known as *sembahyang maghrib* between 7:15 and 8:30 p.m. During the holy fasting month of *bulan Puasa*/Ramadan, Muslims may not eat or drink between sunrise or sunset

and often prefer to eat dinner with relatives or close Muslim friends.

No dietary or time restrictions need be observed when entertaining the Chinese, except that some Chinese who pray to Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, might not eat beef. Some Chinese also, unused as children to taking milk or milk products, might have a problem with dishes heavy in these items. When treating their friends to a dinner, the Chinese often order many courses—the more honored the guest(s) or the more important the occasion, the greater the number of courses. Just be prepared to pace yourself carefully at a Chinese dinner and to be faced with all kinds of food that may not always make it to a Western



Some Chinese who pray to Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, might not eat beef.

dinner table such as fish maws or floats, chickens’ feet, tree fungus, and so on.

Indians have food restrictions depending on their religious persuasion, and it is considerate to check with them if unsure. Hindus do not eat beef because they consider the cow a sacred animal. Indians who are Muslims are prohibited from eating pork or drinking alcoholic beverages. Many Indians do not eat any meat on Fridays and some are vegetarians. In a traditional Indian home, it is not unusual for the hostess to serve the men before the women and then wait for everyone to finish eating before eating herself. Westernized

Indians increasingly follow Western styles of serving food and eating.

Dining out with Malaysian friends is an experience. When dining out, the person who made the invitation usually pays for the meal. Malaysians seldom “go Dutch.” However, among the Chinese, when it is not made clear in advance who is to pay, you may get to witness the different couples fighting to pay the bill or at least making a show of it. This is something to see.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND ROLES



MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN, AND THE ELDERLY

Despite modernization and Western influence from the British and Western educations, double standards still govern relationships between men and women. This is partly due to the continuation of traditional role-playing where the male is usually the breadwinner in the family and partly due to religious laws.

Among Malaysians, the relations between men and women are not only governed by traditional Malay *adat* (custom) but also by Islam. There are no female religious officials, and since Islam is not only a religion but also a way of life, men consequently have great power over how a woman should behave. Women must be zealously protected by their men and shielded from lascivious eyes. A woman must dress modestly in clothing that covers her arms and legs and, among strict Muslims, preferably her hair and head as well. She must sit in an area apart from men when praying at the mosque. She

cannot enter a mosque when menstruating or right after childbirth. She cannot casually touch any man other than her husband without being totally misunderstood and labeled a lewd woman. She might eat apart as well especially if her husband’s friends are visiting. Muslim men may take up to four wives at a time. Fundamentalists would have all Muslim women dress in the concealing *baju kurung* (long-sleeved shift and long skirt) as well as cover their heads with a scarf or headgear called the mini *telekung*. More and more young Malaysian women are pressured by their peers to show their faith through donning the telekung. But a glance at the past would show that the *kebaya* consisting of a lacy or transparent figure-hugging, long-sleeved top worn over a corset and an equally figure-hugging *sarung* was the traditional costume, an indication that traditional Malaysian society was not quite this puritanical. But to sum up, like their Arab sisters, Malaysian women can be resentful of the sympathy shown them by some Western women and may be quick to point out that they cover up by choice and are in many ways better off than Western women.

On the other side of the coin, the woman in traditional Malaysian society has always been somewhat powerful within her own household. She can be strong and influential in her husband’s decision making. In rural areas women play an active economic role, often managing their homes as well as working in the fields. Many Malaysian women hold the household purse strings and are wonders at stretching a little a long way while still saving. In Malaysia, women have had the right to vote since independence was granted in 1957, and Malaysian women from the Western-educated elite down to the village grandmother in a wheelchair actively exercise this right. More and more women have at least a primary level education; and many Malaysian women in the towns and cities have worked before marriage and, having tasted this independence, are not about to accept becoming downtrodden. The wives of the wealthy and of highly placed government officials are active in charity work. Others hold down important jobs themselves or run businesses. Malaysian women have been active in politics since before independence, and a few women hold high governmental positions.



Malaysians love children and the more the merrier it would appear.

Malaysians love children and the more the merrier it would appear. Children are rarely beaten or harshly chastised, but Malaysian parents expect complete loyalty and obedience. The young seldom speak up in a group of older people, and correcting one's elders in public is just not done. Elderly people are accorded the respect due their age and position. There is an expression among the Malays—*makan garam*—which means “to eat salt” or “being experienced,” and a parent may be heard chiding his stubborn, impetuous child who does not listen to advice about not having eaten enough salt yet. When parents grow old, they can count on a place to stay and people to look after them whether they are their children or relatives.

To be born a man is to be born superior, but to be born a woman is a tragedy. This was the way it used to be among the Chinese, but modernization and Western influence has changed this to a great extent. In the past,

Chinese men customarily practiced polygamy or took several concubines after their marriage. It was assumed that the more wives and concubines a man had the greater his prestige and wealth. Some even managed to keep all their wives and children harmoniously under one roof. In Malaysia, this was the practice until non-Muslim men were subjected to anti-polygamy laws. These laws are not retroactive, so it is still possible to run across rich, old Chinese men with several wives. However, the double standard lives on in the insistence of many Chinese men that their wives be chaste and pure before marriage and faithful after, while they see nothing wrong in spending time with mistresses. Male virility can be an obsession among Chinese men, who will even drink potions of crushed pearls and ginseng root to enhance it. While sons are no longer viewed as superior to daughters, the Chinese tradition of expecting the oldest son to perform the customary rites of ancestor veneration still makes having at least one son



Although traditional weddings are still common place, among Malaysians, Chinese, and Indians, the age-old practice of arranged marriages is no longer the norm.

very important. Moreover, the importance of maintaining the family surname is such that for a traditional Chinese, a man without a son is like a man retired without a pension. Even today, some Chinese will go on having children until they conceive a boy.

The traditional role of the Chinese wife is to serve the husband and his parents. However, the Chinese women of Malaysia today enjoy greater independence and status as a result of education and modernization. Many Chinese, including women, are Western educated. Many women work and this grants them the financial independence necessary to escape the authority of their husbands and parents-in-law. Religious or cultural beliefs do not prohibit them from wearing revealing Western clothing, shaking hands with men, drinking, or smoking, although at one time these were frowned upon as not becoming of well-bred women.

Loyalty to the family and filial piety are expected of Chinese children. Traditionally, the family came first, then the local community, and then King and country. Children were taught that their wrongdoings not only brought shame on themselves but also to the whole family. When eating, children are taught to invite their elders to eat first before digging in themselves. Precociousness is not appreciated. Children are expected to show respect and courtesy to their parents and elders through customary speech and behavior, to keep quiet when their elders speak, and never to disagree with or correct their elders in public.

Among the Chinese, a person gains respect and status the older s/he gets. Grand dinner parties are thrown for an elderly person's birthdays when s/he has reached his/her 70s and 80s. Children are expected to provide for their parents in their old age. Even when elderly

parents do not live with their children, it is common for the children to pool resources to help defray their parents' expenses.

Western physical behavior between men and women is taboo to traditional Indians. Men and women do not touch in public. Women seldom shake hands with men unless they are very Westernized. Among traditional Indians, having many daughters and few or no sons is a hardship because the bride's family has to give a dowry to the groom's. The dowry could range from a few hundred *ringgit* and gifts of small household items to thousands of *ringgit* and gifts like cars and refrigerators depending on how eligible the groom is. Thus, from the start it is not easy to be an Indian woman. Once married, she is expected to serve her husband and his parents. In the rural areas of Malaysia where many Indians work as estate laborers, women generally have to work as well.

Indian children and elderly are treated much like those of the Malaysians and Chinese.

DATING, MARRIAGE, AND DIVORCE

Among Malaysians, Chinese, and Indians, the age-old practice of arranged marriages is no longer the norm. Although one-to-one dating is not encouraged much, especially among Malaysians and Indians, many young couples who get married already know each other, and the only formality involved is getting their parent's approval. For those who still accede to matchmaking, their approval of their parents' choice is usually necessary before the marriage proposal is made. Dating, especially among Malaysians and Indians, is expected to lead to marriage.

Chastity, or at least the appearance of it, is necessary to preserve a woman's reputation and chances of getting married.

Because of the assumption that Westerners have looser morals, it is hard for Malaysian women to date American men without having suspicions cast upon their morals

and chastity. Single Americans who date Malaysians should keep this in mind.

Islamic law imposes strict moral boundaries on Muslims, and adultery is ferreted out by Islamic officers and tried by the Syariah courts. *Khalwat* or close proximity between men and women in suspicious circumstances, and *zina*, being caught in the actual act of adultery, are punishable by fines, jail sentences, or strokes of the *rotan* (cane). Every so often Islamic police conduct raids on suspects. Punishment for committing *khalwat* and *zina* is meted out to Muslims regardless of the religion of their partner.

In general, casual touching or holding hands is not common between Malaysian men and women unless they are seriously dating or married. Unlike Americans who feel uncomfortable about holding hands with persons of the same sex, Malaysians do not see anything wrong in a girl holding hands with her girlfriend or boys walking around with their arms draped around each other. Homosexuality and lesbianism, not unknown to Malaysians, are frowned upon, but physical contact between people of the same sex does not lead to the conclusion that they are gay.

In the past, marriage at an early age, especially for women, was the norm, but these days more and more women, regardless of race, marry in their mid- to late 20s. Among Malaysians, brides were usually in their teens while the man was several years older and better, but not necessarily highly educated. Nowadays, Malaysian brides are more likely to be in their 20s and as well educated as their husbands. The same holds true for the Chinese and the Indians.

Marriage has great importance for all three races as witnessed by the elaborate nature of many wedding ceremonies and celebrations. No expense is spared and it is not unusual for some couples to start their connubial life in debt. However, it is becoming more acceptable not to throw extravagant wedding parties.

As with many other things, divorce rates in Malaysia vary from race to race. Something like a third of all Malay marriages end in divorce, with the highest rates

in the strongly Malay states of Kelantan and Trengganu. Remarriage is common. Under Islamic law, men can divorce their wives very easily simply by declaring “talak” (I divorce thee) three times either simultaneously or on different occasions, but this practice is discouraged by the Syariah (Islamic) courts, which offer marriage counseling and reconciliation services.

Interestingly enough, divorce among the Malays is related less to Islamic law than to the Malay cultural environment, in which marriage at an early age, large age gaps between husbands and wives, arranged marriages, and lack of education were the norm. It also seems that women initiate more divorces than men.

The rate of divorce among Malaysian Chinese and Indians is low, probably due to the negative attitude toward divorce among these races.

EMPLOYER-EMPLOYEE RELATIONS—DOMESTIC HELP

Part and full-time domestic help is easily available in Malaysia. By American standards domestic help is affordable, but in recent years, experienced and cheap help is becoming scarcer because many of the young, less well-to-do women who leave school early have been absorbed by the growing manufacturing sector. Domestic help may be obtained via agencies or through friends, neighbors, or other domestics’ recommendations. It is not unusual for domestics to be passed on to newcomers by their predecessors. Besides the amah, who is hired to do a variety of household chores possibly including childcare, available domestic help includes nannies, drivers, gardeners, and security guards.

The level of familiarity between employer and employee varies from household to household. In general, most Western employers treat their domestic help more casually and in a friendlier manner than the Malaysians. Malaysian employers can be more demanding and meaner in every sense of the word with salaries, rest time, and vacations. If employers prefer to be addressed by first name or as Mr. and Mrs. so-and-so, they can

request their domestic help to do so. Domestics should be asked how they would like to be addressed.

Since the Asian sense of shame and embarrassment is intense when a person is sharply reprimanded, it is advisable for the employer to take the time and effort properly to train a new domestic employee to do work according to his/her desires. Domestic employees who are already experienced may be gems, but they can also be difficult to retrain and may show a disposition toward taking over your household. Another important consideration is the race and religion of the employee. Religious observances among the Muslims, for example, preclude them from handling pork and pork products, washing the family pet dog, or working at prayer time.

It is difficult to say to what extent domestic work is covered by Malaysian labor legislation in practice. It appears that issues such as compensation, work hours, time off, vacations, bonuses, the provision of medical treatment, retirement benefits, and so on are usually negotiated between boss and employee. In Kuala Lumpur, most full-time, live-in amahs get RM800–1100 (US\$210–\$289) per month plus room and board. Days off can be negotiated between 1 and 2 days a week, domestics also get one week paid vacation. Medical insurance can be obtained for about RM400 (US\$105) per year.

MALAYSIAN PASSIONS



Many Malaysians go berserk over a thorny, seasonal fruit about the size of a football called the durian. Those Westerners who have braved its odor and texture have variously described the fruit as tasting of a combination of avocado, onions, or rotten cheese with the aftertaste of low-grade butterscotch ice cream. What is worse, you can taste durian for more than 24 hours



A Westerner who is willing to taste the durian—the Malaysian fruit of choice—and who comes to like it, will go up many notches in a Malaysian's esteem.;

after eating it. However, to the Malaysians, the durian is the king of the fruits. A Westerner who is willing to taste the fruit and who comes to like it, will go up many notches in a Malaysian's esteem.

Several times a year, the reader will come across newspaper articles about a rash of hysteria. Hysteria is largely a Malaysian phenomenon that occurs mainly among young Malay women thrown together in a factory or in a school situation. It usually starts off with one female claiming to have seen a ghost, thus causing her to go into fits of screaming and fainting, and it spreads like wildfire. In all seriousness, *bomohs* (Malay shaman) have to be called in to dispel the evil spirits and restore calm. Apparently, Western managers whose factories employ large numbers of young Malaysian women have experienced the daunting task of explaining ghost-busting expenses to corporate headquarters back home.

SENSITIVE ISSUES



Malaysians are not equal under the law. Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution states that the Yang DiPertuan Agung has the responsibility to safeguard the “special position” of the *bumiputera* while safeguarding the “legitimate interests of other communities” at the same time. Among other privileges, Malaysians get preferential treatment in public sector employment, in placement in local institutions of higher learning, in obtaining business permits and licenses, and in qualifying for government scholarships.

The privileged status of the Malaysians, the legitimate interests of the other ethnic groups, citizenship, the

national language, the rights to use other languages, and the sovereignty and prerogatives of the rulers are “sensitive issues” that have been banned from public discussion. Under the Sedition Act of 1948 it is a crime to question these matters publicly. Naturally, there are Chinese and Indians who perceive the “special rights” of the Malaysians as harming their legitimate interests. For the most part, many people, particularly civil servants, are uncomfortable discussing these issues in public.

A theme in Malaysian history is the conscience with which Malays traditionally met and absorbed external influences. Yet, the speed with which they were confronted with change during the colonial period caused disruption in the Malay way of life and led to the inability of the Malaysians as a group to adapt in some areas. The division of labor and occupation along racial lines under the British led to perceived disenfranchisement and a failure to compete successfully, particularly in commerce and education, which continues today. While the British recruited and educated Malaysian aristocrats for the civil service, they discouraged rural Malaysians, whom they preferred to see remain as a “settled peasantry,” from wider opportunity. The resultant anti-colonial tradition can still surface to fuel bitter criticism of imperialist Western media and governments.

Malaysians on the whole have an ambivalent attitude toward the West. On the one hand, they resent the British for having imposed Western ways on them and instilled a sense of the superiority of the West. On the other hand, they can’t escape a feeling that perhaps things Western are superior. Many street names in Kuala Lumpur have been changed from British names to those of Malaysian historical characters or notable persons as part of the process of Malaysianization. The need to exert independence from Western influence is counterbalanced by an equally strong need to gain world recognition. In the 1980s Malaysia sought and won a full seat on the UN Security Council with much local fanfare. Malaysians seem to place a great deal of store in getting into the *Guinness Book of Records*. They publish in the national newspapers with great relish any favorable statement Western tourists make about the

country. Popular music not imported from the west is imitative of it, and a Malaysian is not regarded as truly talented until s/he makes good overseas.

Malaysians are genuinely puzzled, some would say unrealistic, about why Malaysia is not better known and appreciated in the United States. You may hear several times the apocryphal, “You Americans think we still live in trees,” stated with a mixture of sadness and derision.

LIVING IN KUALA LUMPUR



The name Kuala Lumpur has the unromantic meaning of “Muddy Estuary.” The capital and Federal Territory of Malaysia was once only a tin mining outpost on the confluence of the Klang and the Gombak rivers. The construction of a rail line connecting Kuala Lumpur to Klang on the coast in 1886 promoted the rapid development of the settlement. As it grew and prospered, Kuala Lumpur went from being the state capital of Selangor to colonial capital of the Federated Malay States to headquarters of the Federation of Malaya to its present status. Today KL, as it is popularly called, is the seat of the national government and the center of business, trade, and cultural life. The population is 1.4 million (year 2000 statistics).

There are several towns within an hour’s driving distance that deserve brief mention. Petaling Jaya (PJ), originally established as an industrial satellite town southwest of KL, has grown into a self-contained unit with its own share of shopping centers, hotels, restaurants, bars, and parks. Past PJ on the Federal Highway are the new township of Subang Jaya, which houses the most modern hospital in Malaysia and Subang Airport; Shah Alam, the new Selangor state capital with the biggest and grandest mosque in Malaysia; and Kelang, with

Malaysia's biggest port, which is also a drawing card for seafood lovers.

SHOPPING

Shopping in KL ranges from open markets and sidewalk stalls to the air-conditioned comfort of malls and department stores. Shopping can be delightful whether for necessities or for collectibles. Just about anything is available in KL. However, imported items tend to be more expensive because of steep import duties. U.S. products cost 2 to 3 times more than at home. Certain local products are comparable in quality and are worth checking out. Most shops open from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., although some stay open until 10:00 p.m. Many shops are also open on Sundays with earlier closing hours. The ubiquitous 24-hour American 7-Eleven is a welcome sight in KL when other shops are closed.

Groceries are sold at outdoor markets (called wet markets), small neighborhood provision stores, and a number of supermarkets. A few grocery stores, notably Hock Choon's and the Ampang Mini-Market, have sprung up to serve the large expatriate community in KL and are increasingly popular with the Malaysians as well. A wide range of American, Australian, European, and Japanese food and household items in addition to fresh fish, meat, poultry, vegetables, and fruit are available. Vegetables familiar to Westerners such as avocados, carrots, cauliflower, lettuce, celery, broccoli, and green beans are brought down from the hill stations while plums, grapes, oranges, and apples are imported. Local fruits and vegetables are abundant, fresh, and cheap. Local seasonal and non-seasonal fruit is also sold at many roadside stalls. The Embassy Commissary is limited and mostly brings substantial savings on liquor, which is taxed heavily in the open market.

Fresh meats and produce are available at better prices at the open, wet markets, such as the Pudu Market. Pudu Market is convenient to shop at because it is



At 1,483 feet and 88 stories, the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur were two of the tallest buildings in the world when they were completed in 1998. In October 2003 Taipei 101 in Taiwan took over with a height of 1,671 feet.

encircled by sundry goods shops and stalls that carry kitchen utensils, flower pots, baskets, plastic ware, tubs, laundry baskets, hardware, and so on. It is also open every day of the week. Shopping at wet markets is best done early in the morning to ensure that you get the freshest goods. Many market stalls also start closing up by noon. Cut flowers, much cheaper than you will ever find them in the United States, are a good buy at the open markets and are also available at Hock Choon and Petaling Street (Chinatown).



Clogged with automobiles, motorcycles, and noisy scooters, Kuala Lumpur's streets are not easy to navigate.

In the neighborhoods heavily populated by expatriates and the local elite, the “van man” or “van lady” comes right to your door in vans laden with groceries and household items. The special service means that their prices are a little higher than those at the supermarkets and mini-markets, but it is worth it if something is needed in a pinch. In addition, they will get some item for you if you cannot find it at your regular market.

There are several malls, which, like their American counterparts, house a wide variety of stores—boutiques, shoe shops, fabric stores, antique shops, jewelers, pharmacies, bookstores, toy stores, restaurants, fast food outlets, etc. Some of these, namely Yow Chuan Plaza, Ampark Park Plaza, Sungei Wang Plaza, and Subang Parade have supermarkets as well. Subang Parade also has a Toys R’ Us where the price of American toys are comparable to those back home. These are convenient one-stop shopping places and have parking garages as well. Credit cards are accepted in many department stores. One difference from shopping in American stores is that there seem to be many more sales assistants in Malaysian department stores who are not shy about breathing down your neck to the point of mild harassment. Malaysian manufacturers and suppliers insist on placing their own salespeople in the stores to

promote their products and most Asians do not have the same need and respect for personal “space” that Americans do.

There is some duty-free shopping available at 10 outlets in the KL Plaza. Duty-free items include cosmetics, perfumes, jewelry, audio equipment, timepieces, writing materials, cameras and photographic materials, and some local handicrafts. As big-ticket items such as audio equipment and cameras have become more expensive in Singapore, some of the impetus for shopping sprees there has waned. These items are generally cheaper in the United States.

The *pasar malam* (open air night market) is a Malaysian fixture. In KL there are 80 night market sites comprising hawker stalls selling food, ready-to-wear clothing, toys, bags and purses, traditional medicines, CDs and DVDs, and just about anything you can think of. The quality of goods is on the low side, but they are very colorful. The most popular night market is Petaling Street in Chinatown, open seven nights a week. This is the place to pick up cheap imitation watches and brand-name clothing. Most other night markets operate one night a week.

Bargaining is another general difference in shopping practice worth noting. As in most other Asian countries, bargaining is allowed in Malaysia. Good indications of when and when not to bargain are the existence of price tags and the type of establishment where you are shopping. You do not bargain in the larger shops and department stores, but it is permissible to ask about the availability of discounts since they are not always made public. At markets and stalls, you are advised to bargain since the prices quoted are often inflated for foreigners.

For the avid shopper and collector, Malaysian specialties worth buying include batik and songket cloth, Kelantan silverwork, pewterware, ornamental kites and tops, native pottery, jewelry and trinkets, and Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese, Malay, and Victorian antiques.

Some items that should be purchased in the United States either because they are expensive, inferior, or non-existent in Malaysia are greetings cards and paper products, infant furniture and car seats, disposable diapers, and pre-folded cloth diapers. Many drugs available over the counter in the United States require a doctor's prescription in Malaysia and the same brand may not be available. Large Americans might not find clothing or shoes in their size and should either stock up in the United States or have them tailored in Malaysia.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation in Malaysia runs the gamut from rickety bicycles to airplanes. Malaysia has its own airline system, Malaysian Airline (MAS), which has daily flights between KL and various points within country, Asia, Europe, and the United States. Malaysia's railway is known for its punctuality and smooth operation and is one of the last meter-gauge railways. In town and out of town, Malaysians also travel by bus, taxi, lorry, motorcycle, truck, and trishaw. But, given a choice, the private automobile is most popular.

The streets in KL are congested at rush hours and traffic comes to a near standstill after heavy downpours. Although roads in Malaysia are well built and well maintained, the rate at which private automobiles have increased has far outstripped road construction. The organized road system of many younger American cities is not to be found here. Once you miss a turn, you often have to drive around in circles for miles it seems to arrive at your destination. Many roads are also one-way only, which can be very frustrating. Detailed street maps are available, but they give you no idea of one-way streets and where turning is "left only."

Despite initial jitters, Americans adjust quickly to driving on the left-hand side of the road. Traffic circles, or "roundabouts," are a common feature. Traffic flows from right to left; those already in the circle have right of way.

Roundabouts actually work well in aiding the flow of traffic when the roads are not jammed. During rush

hours traffic policemen are stationed at strategic intersections.

Many Malaysian drivers don't seem to know the fundamentals of safe driving such as checking their blind spot or not straddling lanes. In the right-most or passing lane fast and impatient drivers will hound a slower driver, who is usually oblivious, into changing lanes by aggressively riding his tail.

You will also be sharing the roads with thousands of motorcycles with small engines that weave in and out of traffic and pass you on both sides; overloaded buses that are speeding to meet their schedules; and trucks and lorries precariously loaded with giant logs, concrete blocks, or metal pipes. On the outstation roads to other towns, fatal head-on crashes between express buses, lorries, tankers, and cars are commonplace. Yet, passing is necessary to your sanity if you are trapped behind a loaded lorry plodding along at about 20 miles an hour. When all is said and done, the advice of most old hands at living and driving overseas is to "Go with the flow" and "Do as the Romans do." You are probably safer that way.

Most Americans who first arrive without a car depend on taxis for transportation. Fares are reasonable, and in KL the taxis are metered. Some additional tips about taking taxis: if possible, have address and directions on hand in the event that the driver (usually Chinese, in such cases) does not speak English or Bahasa; carry smaller bills not exceeding M\$20.00; call a taxi with plenty of time to spare. Tipping is optional and Malaysians rarely, if ever, tip taxi drivers.

TELEPHONING

The telephone system in Malaysia is quite similar to that in the United States. Many middle-class homes have telephones. Use of the telephone, greetings, goodbyes, and leaving messages do not differ from American practice. There are very few coin-operated booths in Malaysia that are rarely used. Most people carry handphones (cell phones). Handphones can be purchased easily here with the option of prepaid or monthly billing.

Telephone guides are like those in the United States and more up to date than those in many other developing countries. For KL and the Federal Territory there are two volumes, one of which is the yellow pages. The guides are in both English and Bahasa Malaysia. The Malaysian Telecoms Company is very prompt to repair out-of-order telephones and damaged lines. They can be contacted directly.

Trunk calls to other towns in Malaysia and international calls can be made with operator assistance or by dialing direct. Operators speak adequate English. Connections are usually good. It is, however, more costly to call to the United States than to call from the United States to Malaysia, and international lines may be jammed with calls during the holidays. Reduced rates are available during certain periods.

SERVICES: BEAUTICIANS, BARBERS, TAILORS, AND DRY CLEANERS

Hairdressing salons and beauticians can be found in any major hotel or shopping complex as well as in neighborhood shop areas. Appointments are not always necessary but, depending on the popularity of the place and the time of year (for example, on the eve of a major festival), it may be better to make an appointment. Many hairdressing salons are unisex. The better salons have stylists who were trained overseas and who give better quality service. Tipping is customary.

The traditional barbershop is becoming rare in KL as more men turn to unisex salons. Relatively few stylists are experienced at trimming beards and moustaches. Custom tailoring in KL, though not as much of a bargain as in Bangkok, is worth using. Most people learn of good tailors by word of mouth. Some tailors provide material as well, while others require you to get it yourself.

Dry cleaning is comparable in cost and quality to the United States, but be careful with clothes made of very

fine fabrics. Many people at the Embassy use the dry cleaner above Hock Choon's.

CINEMAS, THEATRES, GALLERIES, AND MUSEUMS

Malaysia is rich in native arts and crafts. Malaysians' artistic ability is manifested by their creative use of wood, metal, and plant materials to produce all kinds of handicraft and by their natural appreciation of music, dance, and drama. The Chinese excel in painting in all media, the Indians in dance. These, of course, are generalizations and do not mean that each race does not have individuals talented in other areas of the arts.

Over a dozen cinemas in KL and PJ screen local films as well as films from the United States, Australia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia, and India. Subtitles are in Bahasa Malaysia. The cinemas are reasonably priced at around RM12 (\$3) a ticket. Tickets can be reserved using your handphone or on the web. There are two main companies used in KL and their web sites are: <http://www.tgv.com.my/> and <http://www.gsc.com.my/version2/default2.asp>. It is possible to buy tickets in advance to beat the crowds. Smoking is prohibited. Most films screened are fairly recent but sound quality is poor and Malaysian censors are quick with the scissors, sometimes rendering a film incomprehensible. Most Americans prefer home viewing of DVDs or videotapes. Excellent foreign films are regularly screened by the Alliance Francaise, British Council, Goethe Institute, and Kelab Seni Filem.

Despite the rich heritage of traditional Malay dance drama such as the *makyong* and Malay opera like the *bangsawan*, modern Malaysian theatre is at best amateurish and still in its formative stage. Locally scripted plays with few exceptions tend to have moralistic, didactic themes bordering on melodrama. One or two local theater groups and local playwrights occasionally produce excellent works in English, usually put on at the British Council or the University of Malaya.

Some of the hotels regularly host dinner theater packages with British casts.

A renewed interest in traditional art forms has led to attempts to revive the makyong and the bangsawan. Dance-drama groups, such as the locally renowned Suasana Dance Company, seek to revive and preserve traditional Malay drama and dance by combining traditional music, musical instruments, costumery, and dance steps with modern choreography and foreign themes or legends. Such innovation is also the mark of the KL Dance Theatre, the National Dance Company, and talented individual dancers/choreographers. In addition to these, dance troupes from France, Russia, and elsewhere make their way to Malaysian stages every year.

There is no lack of recitals and concerts featuring both local and foreign musicians, orchestras or pop artists. Malaysians really enjoy the TV show “American Idol” and western music. In general, Malaysians have a high regard for the musical arts; many send their children for music lessons. Local amateur groups welcome expatriates who are classical musicians. Live music is heard at many bars, pups, lounges, and hotel restaurants. Most acts play oldies (evergreens) or pop, but there is a small following for country & western and jazz. Young Malaysians are, for some reason, enthralled by heavy metal rock ‘n roll.

Doing artwork is almost a way of life for Malaysians. Malaysian farmers and fishermen have traditionally killed time after the harvests or between fishing seasons by carving tops and fashioning magnificent kites. Art is part of the school curriculum up to Form Five (17 years old), and many non-working Malaysians and expatriate spouses find it fulfilling to take art lessons. Classes in Chinese brush painting, ceramics, pottery throwing, painting on fine china, batik printing, and so on are available. The fine products of many up-and-coming



Malaysia's Makyong Kedek represents the rich heritage of traditional Malay dance drama.

Malaysian artists are regularly exhibited at the National Art Gallery and a number of private galleries such as Galericitra, Rupa Gallery, 10 Kia Peng, On-Tai Gallery, and Art House Gallery.

The National Museum is the place to go to study Malaysia's history and to enjoy the beautiful artifacts and jewelry of the ancient Malay courts. In addition, there are many fine old buildings—examples of British and Moorish architecture—Chinese and Indian temples, and mosques scattered around KL and in other areas of Malaysia that are worth seeing.

Savoring the culture of every state is made possible by the annual “Malaysia Fests” held in KL. Cultural events abound, too, during each racial group's religious festivals. For example, Chinese opera may be staged during the annual Mooncake Festival. At the Central Market, an attractive shopping arcade built on the site of Chinatown's former wet market, monthly cultural programs are held.

RESTAURANTS, BARS, LOUNGES, AND DISCOS

Malaysians love to eat so it is small wonder that Malaysia is a food-lover's paradise. Local or



Nasi Lemak, a local delicacy, is rice cooked in coconut milk and eaten with a range of side dishes, including anchovies, cucumber, egg, and an extremely spicy curry dish.

international, bland or spicy, dirt cheap or expensive—the variety is tremendous.

If you do not cringe at the thought of sitting near a drain, you will enjoy eating out at roadside hawker stalls, which offer all kinds of noodle dishes and barbecued meats—the Malaysian version of fast food. There are also non-pretentious coffee shops, air-conditioned Western-style restaurants, and fast-food outlets such as McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Wendy's. Dress is casual unless you are going to an expensive restaurant. Most international cuisines popular with Americans are available, with the exception of deli, Mexican, Greek, and Italian, which are either not available nor authentic. Many hotel restaurants, however, do food “promotions” featuring anything from French game to Spanish *tapas* (bar snacks). Most restaurants fall into one of the four groups—Malay, Chinese, Indian, or continental. After that come Thai and steakhouses. Learning the names of the popular local dishes can take a while. For Malay food, be sure to try *nasi lemak* and *daging rendang*. Common Chinese dishes include fried kway teow, Hokkien mee, and Hainanese chicken. Indian favorites are roti canal and Tandoori chicken.

All three cuisines are very spicy, although bland Chinese food, particularly Cantonese and Teochew, are easy to find.

When you enter a restaurant, waiters/waitresses are usually quick to seat you and offer you a menu. However, some Chinese coffee shops do not have menus and the clientele depend on recommendations. This could pose a problem when the waiters/waitresses do not speak English. Many Chinese restaurants will recommend fish or prawn dishes, since they are the most expensive items available. At the hawker stalls, food is open to view, and you can always point to what you want. To summon service, you can catch the waiter's/waitress's eye and beckon with the palm down. Signaling with a writing

motion is one way to get the bill.

Malaysians are family-oriented, and dining out is an experience to be enjoyed by all the members of the family. Large families of three generations, babes in arms included, trooping en masse to a restaurant is the norm rather than the exception. High chairs are usually available except at hawker stalls.

Eating out in Malaysia is much cheaper than in the United States. With the exception of stalls, all restaurants charge a 5% government tax and many also add a 5 or 10% service charge, in which case there is no need to tip. Malaysians either do not tip or tip very small amounts, but this Western custom is much appreciated. Be prepared for the pit latrine or restrooms that are wet and dirty.

There are many pubs, bars, and lounges in KL and PJ, and they tend to be busiest after 9:00 p.m. Except in hotels, they are mostly unpretentious, though not dives, and few resemble yuppie fernbars. In the past, few women, especially single, unaccompanied women patronized bars. Many pubs and bars still tend to be the haunts mainly of men. Despite Islam, many

Malaysian men as well as other Malaysians can be found in these places in the metropolitan area. Lounges are like bars except that they are more expensive and many have GROS, that is, Guest Relations Officers—young and pretty girls, not necessarily prostitutes—whose job is to sit with and entertain clients in return for an hourly fee or very expensive drinks.

Discotheques in Malaysia are no different from those in the United States. Teens and Malaysian yuppies are the usual patrons, and competition for clients is intense.

RECREATION

There are some very nice parks in KL such as the Lake Gardens, Taman Titiwangsa, and Taman Perdana. While there are many green pockets in KL and PJ, public children's playgrounds are few and far between. Not too far outside KL are Templar Park and Mimaland. The latter is a huge recreation park with children's playgrounds and sports facilities for adults.

Gymnasiums and health clubs, increasing in number, are usually part of a hotel and require membership. There are several golf and tennis and swimming clubs. Memberships in the exclusive clubs used to be hard to come by and were very expensive but are becoming cheaper. Besides golf, tennis, and swimming, other types of recreation popular among expatriates include squash, bowling, boating or sailing, scuba diving, flying, horseback riding, running with the Hash House Harriers, and playing bridge. There is also a softball league for the beginning or advanced player.

HOTELS AND VACATIONING IN MALAYSIA

Hotel services are similar to those in the United States. KL has some beautiful, top-notch hotels. Tipping is welcomed by bellhops and doormen, of course, but many of the good hotels have a no tipping rule. There are many nice places to go for a long weekend or a week's vacation. Penang and Melaka are good for sightseeing.

HEALTH

Medical facilities used by expatriates are excellent, and for routine care, are comparable to the United States, except in price. Doctor's bills are cheap! Tap water is potable in the KL area, although bacterial filters are available and are advisable if you have an infant. Although the water is flouridated, flouride supplements should be given to infants and children. With common sense, you can avoid serious diseases, which are found more often in rural areas and result from poor hygiene. You should remember to clean any cuts thoroughly since microorganisms breed profusely in the tropics.

Public toilets exist in many shopping complexes and restaurants. Although they have improved vastly in the last few years, they still leave much to be desired in terms of cleanliness and modernity. They either consist of squat toilets or raised toilets that sometimes are too dirty to sit on. Toilet paper is usually not provided or if available is akin to sandpaper. A lot of restrooms have faucets and a short piece of hose or a hand bucket rather than paper. As a consequence, the floors can get very wet.

BEHAVIOR IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

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Malaysia is a relatively safe and peaceful country. There are no known specific terrorist threats against U.S. facilities or interest in Malaysia. The updated State Department Public Announcements available on the State Department website have all current information. Malaysia is one of the safest countries in Southeast Asia for resident and visiting Americans. Most criminal activity directed against foreigners is limited to non-violent crimes such as petty theft and credit card fraud.

Burglar alarms, metal grills on doors and windows, security lighting, radios, and safehavens are all requirements for American Embassy personnel. Employees are informed to be alert to any strangers lurking around their homes. Other expatriates living in the area have experienced more burglaries and break-ins because they lack the above security devices. When someone knocks on your door or rings your doorbell, you should never, ever open your door until you have checked that you know who it is. Your children and domestic help should be informed about security measures. The few instances of burglaries or attempted break-ins have been the result mainly of carelessness or naiveté on the part of the victims. Many Malaysians also buy car alarms.

In the event that the crisis situation is a personal one, the Community Liaison Office coordinator can help or s/he can refer you to professional help. The American Association of Malaysia has a resident psychologist as well. There is also a local Alcoholics Anonymous program.

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